

EGRET FARMING IN SIND.

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(With 2 plates)

Whilst spending a fortnight duck shooting in Sind, I took the opportunity of visiting one or two Egret farms. My object was to try and form some sort of opinion as to whether the method of farming, as practised by the villagers, was satisfactory or not.

There are many difficulties which stand in the way of an individual who attempts to collect true information on a subject that closely concerns the pockets of the people from whom he is trying to collect that information. Not the least of these is, that one is usually mistaken for what one is not. As an instance of this, at Changro, in the Kambar district, near Larkana,—a busy centre of Egret farming,—I was mistaken for a Government of India official expressly sent down from Delhi, for the object of finding some just cause for levying an increased tax on Egret feathers. No assurances on my part could remove this idea from the minds of the villagers. The information obtained there was consequently entirely derived from personal observation, and any other facts, for the truth of which I had to rely on the word of the villagers themselves, were not probably strictly within the bounds of accuracy.

Again, one of the most important features of Egret farming, is the actual method of plucking; for it is in doing this that the greatest cruelty can be practised.

If one cannot witness the actual operation of plucking, the next best thing is to be able to see the bird immediately afterwards. This I was able to do at an Egret farm on the Munnchur Lake near Boubak Road. The Mahanas on the Munnchur themselves proffered a great deal more information than any that I had been able to collect either in the Larkana or in the Kambar district—information that I was able to verify by personal observation. They were no strangers to me and consequently had no suspicions of my having any underlying motive for my enquiries.

Here also I was lucky enough to meet an Excise Officer who had himself countless times witnessed the capture, breeding, transport and plucking of the birds, and consequently was able to add invaluable and reliable information to that which I had already obtained.

In the following table I have endeavoured to collate all the facts of importance, accuracy and interest obtained from the sources above mentioned, avoiding as far as possible any statements which I have not been able to prove either by personal observation or through reliable information.

Though there are many Egret Farms in Sind and I have had the opportunity of visiting only a very few of them, I am nevertheless convinced that the methods practised in one are in the main those practised throughout the whole of that country.

Enclosures for Birds.

1. The size of the average enclosure is about 40 feet long, 20 broad and 5 high.
2. The walls and roof are constructed of poles and matting, or of woven reeds.
3. The floor is of hard mud and the general condition is extremely clean.
4. The number of birds to each enclosure varies from 80 to 120.
5. In some places birds are marked according to broods or enclosures by dyeing the breast feathers.
6. No perches are provided for the birds.

Food and Water.

1. The food supplied consists of un-chopped small fry.



ONE OF THE ENCLOSURES IN A SIND EGRET FARM.



NESTING BIRDS.



ADDITIONS TO THE FAMILY.

2. In all the places visited the supply of these fry was easily obtainable by netting in the neighbouring dhands and they were all fresh and clean.
3. The quantity given per bird per day was sufficient—about 1 lb. a day.
4. Water is supplied in earthenware bowls which are left lying on the ground and of which there are large numbers in each enclosure.
5. This water is obtained either from the well in the village itself, as at Changro where the villagers drink the same water as that supplied to the birds, or from the neighbouring dhand, as on the Munnchur.

N.B.—As the condition of the feathers of the bird is improved by a good supply of both fresh food and water, it is certainly not in the interests of the villagers to in any way stint them of these necessities. In all the enclosures I visited the birds appeared well fed and not in the least hungry, and there was never any visible sign of any shortage of either food or drink, both of which were lying about in every enclosure in large quantities.

Mutilation.

1. No blind Egrets were seen.
2. The terminal joint of the wing of every bird is amputated.
3. Birds are never tethered in the enclosure.
4. Whenever the birds are moved, either by road or rail, the eyelids are sown up. The method adopted is as follows:—
The lower lid of each eye is pierced by a fine needle and a piece of very fine cotton thread is drawn through. The two pieces of cotton are then tied over the head of the bird, thus causing the lower eyelid to be drawn up over the upper eyelid.

N.B.—With the exception of the Egret farm on the Munnchur very little transportation takes place. In fact the transportation of the birds is almost entirely confined to those times when the newly captured Egrets are brought by rail from the place where they have been originally caught to the farm in Sind which has bought them. As most of the farming is carried on by breeding, there is very little transportation taking place and therefore very little suturing.

But on the Munnchur it is quite different. Here the Mahanas are compelled by floods to move their huts twice a year—once at the beginning of the rains from the borders of the lake to Bubak village, and again back again at the end of the rains. Hence the birds have their eyelids sown up twice a year.

I carefully examined over 50 birds on the Munnchur Lake which had undergone the operation of suturing, but never discovered any visible ill effects caused thereby. But it must be remembered that as I visited the farm in February, no birds had been sutured for the last four or five months.

Extraction of Plumes.

1. All the dorsal plumes of *H. garzetta* are plucked once every three months, just before moulting would naturally take place.
2. The plumes are not plucked one by one, but all together, one man holding the bird while the other plucks.
3. The feathers are held in the centre and are jerked out.
4. The backs of the birds immediately after plucking show considerable laceration and a good deal of blood is drawn during the process.
5. The occipital plumes of *H. garzetta* are not plucked.

N.B.—Curiously enough the bird, during the actual plucking, does not show any obvious signs of pain. There are no bad after effects that I could see. The bird does not sulk but continues, on release, to walk about and feed as if nothing had occurred. What pain there may be would appear to be purely temporary. But from the con-

dition of the backs of the birds which I was able to examine carefully on the Munnchur Lake, I am convinced that the pain inflicted by plucking, as the villagers do it, temporary as it may be, is certainly *very* considerable. It is also hard to believe that there are no permanent after effects, though I never found a single trace of one. The method they adopt however for extracting the feathers in Sind is undoubtedly disgraceful and all the pain inflicted could certainly be avoided.

Breeding and Treatment of Young.

1. When the nesting season approaches, in some cases old Egret nests are provided; in others dried sticks and grass are given the birds with which to make their own nests.
2. Sufficient quantities of nests or of other materials are provided to allow for every pair of birds who wish to nest.
3. No perches are provided and the nest has to be made on the ground.
4. The number of birds in each enclosure is not reduced when the nesting season approaches which leads to over-crowding.
5. The young birds are not removed from the parent birds, nor are they fed in any separate way or on any other diet.
6. The parent birds and their young are placed in separate enclosures and there is no interference with the natural bringing up of the young birds.
7. On the young birds being fledged the terminal joint of the wing is cut and the new brood is then placed in a fresh enclosure, the parent birds being returned to their original enclosure.

N.B.—On the Munnchur the parent birds are allowed to wander free with their young outside the enclosure. But on the young becoming fledged the same procedure is followed as above.

Capture of Wild Birds.

1. Comparatively speaking few wild birds are captured, and the stock is almost entirely renewed by breeding.
2. In the Kambar district the villagers say that they import their new birds from the Punjab and that no trapping of any sort takes place in their district.

N.B.—This is probably not true, but I could obtain little information about this actual fact.

3. On the Munnchur, when wild birds are required, they are captured as follows:—

A one inch mesh net is staked out on the ground when and where the Mahanas expect the wild birds to come. Round this net are placed stuffed decoys. When the wild bird alights he gets his feet entangled in the mesh of the net and is then easily captured.

The wing is then cut and the birds are put into an enclosure.

4. There seems to be no special method of taming the newly captured birds.
5. The method of starving wild birds as a means of taming them is not employed.

N.B.—I myself know of one wild bird which was captured, slightly hurt, by a private individual. On being cured, which took only a few days, it was handed over to the Mahanas on the Munnchur who placed it straight into an enclosure with the other already tame birds.

Transportation of Birds.

1. The cages employed for transportation, either by rail or otherwise, are:
Size:—3 feet by 3 by 3.
From 15 to 20 birds are placed in these cages.
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